

The Disaster of Humanity

The world of communication and information is currently in a state of rapid evolution with the rise of social media platforms like TikTok gaining popularity and adhering to individual experiences on their platforms. Many studies as of late have been covering the topic as the ethical debate continues during this evolutionary period. Certain studies look at the business models of these platforms and how their algorithms tend to operate with poor ethical standards towards the users. One paper that focuses on the algorithms and the ethics of how they are implemented to be addictive is *Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction* by Vikram Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez. Bhargava and Velasquez argue that the algorithms are purposefully designed to be addictive and cause the users to spend their time and attention on their platform rather than competing platforms as this attention would make them money in what they call the “attention economy.”¹ This name is self explanatory; it is the complex system of supply and demand of the attention of people, where the greater attention a platform retains, the better performance the platform has.

One major aspect that Bhargava and Velasquez like to grow emphasis on is the addictive nature of the algorithm and how that relates to internet addiction and the other mental health problems that follow suit (i.e., depression and anxiety being the focus). These addictive algorithms are the basis that gain the upper hand in the attention economy and the ethics behind them are questionable at best according to Bhargava.² The addictive nature exploits the users on the platform and the biggest problem is the development of depression and anxiety from internet and social media addiction. Understanding how addiction works, and the nature of the platforms, Bhargava shows that the addiction is tied to the depressive and anxious feelings obtained and does not point to the content of the site. More specifically, the addiction derives from the negative feeling that one gains from the interactions and consumption of information the algorithm provides on the platform.³ While internet and social media addiction are not distinctly in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) from the APA (American Psychological Association), both are widely accepted and acknowledged as addictions due to the negative effects known that harm those affected’s physical health, life, emotions, and other parts of their lives that make the individual a functioning member of society.⁴

The main intent of the Bhargava paper was to introduce ethics of the business models that these addictive social media platforms provide as the literature on it did not exist, but the literature on social media addiction was plentiful.⁵ The ethics was brought up for the business model of these platforms due to their exploitative nature of the addiction. Bhargava found that these business models were severely unethical as it exploits users using a part of their lives that

¹ Vikram R. Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez, “Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction,” *Business Ethics Quarterly*, June 2020, pp. 1-39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2020.32>, 1.

² Bhargava, 1.

³ Bhargava, 4.

⁴ Bhargava, 5.

⁵ Bhargava, 2.

they cannot avoid in a legal way.⁶ This is apparent through children who are legally allowed to use the internet—unlike illicit addictive substances—typical workers who must use the internet for email communications, university students who also use email for communication and other school portals where they access grades, course material, communication to professor, and announcements.⁷ Bhargava acknowledges that the banning of these platforms is not feasible, but offers the criticism of lowering the barrier to remove oneself from social media as sites like Facebook hid the “delete account” option in the settings and other miscellaneous barriers that would have the user cave in and keep their account.⁸

While the algorithm is to blame for the addictive nature that social media platforms provide, Bhargava and Velasquez blame the entirety of the addictive nature to the design of the platform rather than other core components of these platforms. A major distinction would be the content that is used on the platforms provided rather than the algorithm that provides it. This would make the algorithm a tool in the game of social media addiction rather than the cause of it. One country that recognized that this is Norway. In 2021, Norway amended their Marketing Act to implement that all advertising that has edited the body shape, size, or skin must be marked accordingly.⁹ While this is not specific to all forms of social media content, this is applicable to media in Norway that is categorized as advertisement and this is done with the purpose of preventing social insecurity, bad conscience, low self-esteem or contributes to body pressure and if the advertiser or the designer of the advertisement do not mark it, a fee may be instituted as punishment.¹⁰

VKontakte Case Study

These variances in similar content can be seen all over the world and on other prominent platforms outside of the main western platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Taking a deeper look at a platform called VKontakte (VK), which is a Russian based social media platform, it is inherent what draws one into a platform showcasing some of the aspects that Bhargava and Velasquez wrote about in action and how other things come into play.

The specific reasons to look at VKontakte are as follows:

1. Non-western based social media platform to see how content would vary between cultures.
2. Russia has high censorship when it comes to speaking against the Kremlin.
3. Russia with said high censorship would also collect information that other platforms would not do so.
4. There is an ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine at the time of this paper, where Russia began with an invasion in January of 2022.
5. VKontakte is synonymous with Facebook in Russia.

Because VKontakte is non-western based, it showcases how the internet is used outside of North America and Western Europe as those two regions can become very prominent on large

⁶ Bhargava, 25.

⁷ Bhargava, 18.

⁸ Bhargava, 24.

⁹ Act on amendments to the Marketing Act, etc. (tagging of retouched advertising), Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (2021), <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2021-06-11-62?q=markedsf%C3%B8ring>.

¹⁰ Act on amendments to the Marketing Act, etc.

international platforms like Twitter. Also, taking a glance at the user interface of VK, one could mistake it for Facebook as it looks eerily similar. The colors, the placement, organization of the user's timeline, where the platform recommends communities, and even the interface of the ads section (the equivalent of Facebook Marketplace).

Vkontakte is indirectly owned by the Russian government as the owners of VK have large ties to the Kremlin. This is important to acknowledge because major events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine would not be on the site due to its anti-Kremlin nature. This is also an important distinction to make because of how the platform collects information that you supply it. VK requires minimal information for signing up and that is the bare minimum that you are required to supply for access to the site.¹¹ This is "first name, last name, date of birth, gender, mobile phone number," and these are used with the intentions of maintaining the VK Ecosystem and grants the ability to regain access to the profile if one had lost it at any point.¹² Vkontakte also collects information, like the user's IP address and uses that with the purpose of providing the user a better experience. This is apparent when clicking on some of the communities, the subsequent recommended communities are all along the same form of content.

The content of VKontakte is very similar to other social platforms like Facebook and Twitter. When first signing up, the recommended communities that first appear are meme pages, aesthetically pleasing pages, and some more lewd content. Meme pages being dedicated to humor, whether that be wholesome content like cats and dogs, to more questionable humor talking about tragic events in history. Aesthetically pleasing pages being dedicated to artistic photos, designs, interior design, clothing styles, and other aspects of life. An example of this would be *Dark Academia*, where one would dress like they were a professor from the 1800's and do so with darker tones of clothing and an office with matching tones to the outfit. VK is more sexually suggestive than that of Facebook, but probably lines more along with Instagram and probably just tamer than Twitter as those platforms have more loose Terms of Service when it comes to explicit content (Twitter being the more lenient of the two by a land slide). These very odd and explicit photos are very odd for first suggestions to a new user on their site. One post in a group named "めちゃくちゃ世代," which roughly translates to "Insane Generation" has some of these explicit posts, including one where a girl poses sexually with a handgun.¹³ This drives the point that even through cultural differences between Russia and North America, the content still stands in a similar and recognizable fashion.

One difference to be noted in the content of VKontakte and other western platforms is the lack of content that surrounds Ukraine and more political stances than on any counterparts. This could be attributed to many things, censorship of the site due to their association to the Kremlin (this option being the most likely and will be treated as the solution), the IP address of the computer that this research was done on was in the United States defaulting to censor the site (this is probably the least likely), or the more political content is hidden in the darker corners of the platform and more digging needed to be done as the site is not used politically. This is odd as western platforms and users of those platforms would lose their minds during major political events (i.e., the Supreme Court of the United States overturning the decision of Roe vs. Wade

¹¹ "VK Ecosystem Privacy Policy." VK ID. Accessed June 28, 2022. <https://id.vk.com/privacy>.

¹² "VK Ecosystem Privacy Policy." VK ID. Accessed June 28, 2022. <https://id.vk.com/privacy>.

¹³ めちゃくちゃ世代. 2022. "Be loyal to the one who is loyal to you." Vkontakte, June 25, 2022. https://vk.com/wall-181245425_128927.

was a major topic on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram).¹⁴ This is not as important for a distinction as the idea that social media content is not based on algorithms and design and those two things are solely distinct from each other. This would be analogous to a drug dealer that sells a drug that makes the consumer depressed or anxious. The dealer would be the social media platform as they supply the content through various ways, the depression drug would be the content of the platform (selfies, pictures of cats, memes, etc.) and the buyer would be the user of the platform ultimately consuming the product and gaining the mental issues that are attached to it. The overall “winner” in the scenario is the platform or the drug dealer in this analogy as they make money off the despair of others that they directly supply to the consumer.

Another aspect to the content being similar to that of western platforms are the same effects that social media has on Russian citizens. Much like Bhargava discusses, social media has a negative impact on the lives of the users causing depression and anxiety. This is also the case when it comes to Russia, where VK is the largest social media platform followed by Instagram.¹⁵ This is important to state as it is very important to know the impact of this site and can somewhat treat VK and Russia as an isolated group where the United States and Facebook can be the equivalent of the control group. A study done looked at the quality of life in different regions looking at communities on the VK platform. This was done by analyzing the tone or feelings attached to the message, status update, or other various forms of communication on the site.¹⁶ The overall results were that the net quality of life that VK communities produced were negative and that there was one region that had a net positive attitude.¹⁷ This region was Chukotka Autonomous Region out of the 83 regions looked at. While this study is not to determine that the VK platform causes depression, it is a good indication of how the overall experience and attitude of the users is portrayed. Overall, VK users have a negative attitude according to that study and this connects the poor mental health and the content to the claim that the content is to consider as a separate entity from the platform that it is mediated on.

Another example of this is a study done on Russian mothers and the impact of social media on their mental health (primarily their self-esteem), found that even in this isolated land of Russia, young mothers have this pressure to have a good digital appearance and this pressure is taxing mentally on them.¹⁸ Another component that the study found was the part that mothers would use social media platforms in order to make sure that they were not incompetent parents and that they used them for discussions.¹⁹ This showcases both sides of the coin that is social media and how it is used. The darker side of the coin being that people use it as a way to show how well they are doing whereas the flipside of that coin is the nice and communities developed that can prosper thanks to social media and the wonderful individuals that make the wholesome community thrive. However, the light side of the coin is mostly applicable to the older members in the study and that does not allow for the better use of future accounts as the younger and

¹⁴ Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, 945 F. 3d 265 (5th Cir. 2022).

¹⁵ Emma Garofalo, “What Is VK? 8 Things You Should Know about Russia’s Facebook,” MUO, November 4, 2021, <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/10-incredible-vk-facts-you-should-know-aka-russias-facebook/>.

¹⁶ Evgeniy Shchekotin et al., “Assessment of Quality of Life in Regions of Russia Based on Social Media Data,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2021): pp. 182-198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18793665211034185>, 187, 193.

¹⁷ Schekotin, 193.

¹⁸ Elmira Djafarova and Oxana Trofimenko, “Exploring the Relationships between Self-Presentation and Self-Esteem of Mothers in Social Media in Russia,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 73 (2017): pp. 20-27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.03.021>, 16.

¹⁹ Djafarova, 14.

newer moms would try to show off their lives in these communities. This would also create this illusion for new mothers that would try and gain helpful information that would otherwise be inaccessible due to lack of family members, lack of maternal friends, etc. This illusion would be indistinguishable to the negligent eye.

One thing that can help understand the issue with the content of social media and even the amendment on the Norwegian Marketing Act, is the inability to differentiate between simulation and not. This is a part of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, where Baudrillard argues that the current society is illusioned by symbols and images that society has deemed to depict reality, which he denotes as "simulacra" which are basically copies of the original item.²⁰ While this is not an argument for or against all of reality and society being an illusion like Baudrillard says, this is applicable to the consumption of social media. The content on social media and the major accessibility of filters on camera apps and apps for social media platforms, provide the ease to alter photos taken and just as easily can upload them to the internet. Once someone consumes that image, the debate on whether or not that the photo was altered is available, making a more conscious effort in distinguishing the simulacra and the original physical person. Norway's amendment looks at this and wants to prevent this issue, but has done so in a very unintrusive way by making advertisers label it as edited. This does not prevent the entirety of this illusion as one could just not see the label or know what explicitly was altered. One example could be the waist of a model slimmed down and a consumer of that media could think that the model's hips were widened, or their shoulders broadened, or the countless other things that could be altered. This makes it impossible to enforce the securities in place until they are thoroughly examined by an expert. And then the issue becomes should altered photos become banned or heavily regulated, which would be a terrible solution as this would limit the ability to do art or even refurbish photos. There does not seem to be a definitive solution when it comes to preventing the illusions of edited photos without just making photos and other forms of visual media illegal, but the Norwegian amendment is a good starting place with this ever-evolving world of media and information.

Conclusion

While the notion that social media is commonly known as a terror on humanity, there are more reasons to that than just the design of these horrific platforms. The indistinguishability between what is real and modified on social media leaves major psychological issues for the consumer and benefits the distributor and not the consumer. VK is an interesting platform to look at (and probably even more so with a deeper dive and a better understanding of Russian culture) due to its distinctness from western platforms because of the concentration of Russians that use the site. This allows for a good examination of the content that the site provides and the impact that it has on its users. Bhargava tended to ignore the content at hand and allocated the blame to the algorithm as it looked at the business models these companies have. VK would have a different business model than that of Twitter or Facebook due to their ownership being Kremlin affiliated and this limits their content that the platform can provide. Even from the information that the site collects from the user is helpful in this discussion. For example, a user logged in with an IP address linked to the United States will receive news feeds from America, but routed

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2020), 9.

through Russian news sources (even local news instead of global news are recommended to users outside of Russia).

The content of VK and other social media sites are hard to distinguish from reality due to their misinformation, altered nature, or even their wholesomeness. With Baudrillard's argument that reality is not real becoming more apparent with the rise of social media and how it has evolved in the past decade, the algorithm is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how scary the internet is changing the users. The users becoming addicted, depressed, anxious, mindlessly scrolling through what one could assume is mountains of information. The future is dark with the impact that these platforms have and the power that they maintain over society currently. While regulations like Norway are a good start, they will become obsolete, or loopholes will be found that will constitute a new policy that will either fail for not doing enough or failing at the starting line for doing too much. While internet censorship is undesirable in places like the United States or western European nations as it would come off very authoritarian and revoking freedoms of the people, it is a better solution than to let people become mindless chickens that cannot fathom an existence without caring about the Kardashians.

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